

INSIDE



TRACKS

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## Bull Trout Decline Prompts Call for Federal Listing

It's been called the Flathead's Flashiest Fish, the Travelin' Fish, the Bear of the River. The bull trout is the biggest, farthest-migrating native fish in the Flathead.

Bull trout for decades have attracted attention from anglers, scientists and naturalists. But at the turn of the century they were despised as predators, and bounties were even offered for killing them. For many years the fish has been considered a "Species of Special Concern" by the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), and afforded special protection. But with recent declines in bull trout numbers, many now feel that protection has not been enough.

A series of events over the last few months has sharply focused new attention on the bull trout. In October, biologists found continued declines in the bull trout spawning run in the Flathead Lake and River System, home of the strongest population of bulls in the United States. During the same month, several environmental groups petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the bull trout as endangered in the five western states in which it resides. And in November, the FWP

Commission and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes took steps to halt all bull trout fishing in Montana west of the Continental Divide.

FWP Biologist Tom Weaver, who has worked with bull trout perhaps more than anyone, sees an alarming downward trend in the Flathead Lake spawning run. "If you look at the most important spawning streams we survey each year, you get an idea of just how poor the 1992 spawning run was," said Weaver. "The 13-year average for Coal and Whale creeks in the North Fork Flathead drainage was 41 and 109 spawning nests respectively. This fall we were only able to find 7 nests in Coal Creek and 12 nests in Whale Creek. That's frightening to me." Weaver noted that overall the counts in all monitoring tributaries were down 65 percent.

Weaver noted that spawning had declined in 1990 and 1991, but only in certain streams. "In 1992 the numbers of spawning nests was down in virtually every stream, including streams in Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. There's something going on in the Flathead River or in Flathead Lake that is knocking down survival rates of the young bull trout."

Asked to name the possible



**SPECIES OF SPECIAL CONCERN.** Biologist Tom Weaver holds a 13-pound adult bull trout captured and released in 1990 from Big Creek. The adults, which may grow to 25 pounds and 3 feet long, mature in Flathead Lake and migrate up to 150 miles to spawn in small tributaries.

causes for the decline in Flathead Lake bull trout numbers, biologists cite some combination of the following:

**\* Predation:** Lake trout, an introduced fish species, may be gobbling up large numbers of young bull trout in the Flathead River and Flathead Lake. Biologists believe that numbers of lake trout have increased because young lake trout have survived better feeding on Mysis shrimp. The disappearance of kokanee from the lake may also have increased predation on remaining species such as bull trout.

**\* Competition:** Young lake trout or lake whitefish (another species that appears to be on the increase) may be out-competing young bull trout for space and food in the river and lake.

**\* Operations of Hungry Horse Dam:** In recent years, increased water releases from Hungry Horse Dam during the summer and fall have chilled (Continued on Page 2)

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# Bull Trout Decline...

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water temperatures in the Flathead River. These unnaturally cold summer temperatures may be affecting the bull trout spawning migration or survival of young bull trout.

## \* Decline in Tributary Habitat:

Forest practices, road building, culvert placement and other human activities have affected the quality of sensitive stream habitats used by spawning and rearing bull trout.

\* **Angling:** Angling regulations have become more restrictive in the past 30 years; but mortality from angling probably has contributed to the decline.

\* **Drought:** The Flathead experienced drought and near-record low flows in 1987 and 1988. These poor water conditions in the tributaries could have caused poor survival of young bull trout during those years.

**In trying to explain the decline** in the Flathead Lake bull trout, biologists are looking at the populations in the Swan and South Fork drainages which are isolated by dams. Bull trout numbers in those drainages are stable or increasing. The drainages do not contain lake trout or lake whitefish, although Swan Lake does support Mysis shrimp. Neither system receives cold water discharges from Hungry Horse Dam.

Biologists note that these factors could magnify predation and competition.

**According to Jim Vashro**, FWP fisheries manager in Kalispell, many steps have already been taken to protect bull trout in the Flathead System. "Beginning in 1953, we closed many bull trout spawning streams to angling," said Vashro. "Since that time we reduced the angling limit on bull trout from 15 fish to 1 fish, and recently, adopted seasonal closures on the river and lake fishery for bull trout. Working with the Forest Service and other land managers, we've stepped up efforts on stream habitat protection. And we've increased the angling limit on lake trout in the river and lake in an attempt to reduce the predation problem."

**Will these steps halt the decline of bull trout in Flathead Lake?**

Vashro notes that if predation by lake trout is the major problem it will be difficult to turn it around. "Hopefully, selective withdrawal will be installed as planned on Hungry Horse Dam to correct the cold water discharges into the river."

Vashro noted that it could take years for the selective withdrawal system to be authorized and built, even though it was approved as a mitigation measure by the Northwest Power Planning Council in 1991. He added that protection of stream habitat quality over the long term will be vital in maintaining bull trout in the system.

Mike Enk, a fisheries biologist for the U.S. Forest Service on the Swan Lake District, noted that his agency is taking steps to reduce habitat damage in headwater areas. "We have adopted implementation guidelines to clarify standards in the Forest Plan for timber sales in sensitive areas," said Enk. "These guidelines mean better protection for bull trout habitat."


**A petition to list bull trout** as a federally protected species is currently being considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The petition, filed by three Montana-based environmental groups, asks for endangered status for bull trout in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Nevada. The decision on listing could take two years.

Chris Hunter, FWP special projects bureau chief in the Fisheries Division in Helena, said that FWP is ready to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the process. "We have just completed a state-wide status review

of bull trout, and we are in the process of outlining a recovery plan for Montana," said Hunter. "We will cooperate fully with the Fish and Wildlife Service during the review period."

Hunter noted that the FWP has taken no position at this time whether or not to recommend federal listing for the bull trout. He added that FWP will take a position at some point as the process goes forward.

**Further protection for the Flathead bull trout** was granted by the FWP Commission at its November 6 meeting in Helena. The Commission tentatively approved emergency fishing regulations that close all waters in Montana west of the Continental Divide to bull trout fishing. The Commission seeks public comment on the proposal by December 11. Comments should be addressed to FWP, 1420 East Sixth Ave., Helena, MT 59620. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have previously closed reservation waters to angling for bull trout, and they are considering a closure on the south half of Flathead Lake during the same period.

**An open house** on the bull trout issue will be held to receive public comment and answer questions from 3-8 p.m., Dec. 3, at FWP headquarters in Kalispell. The open house will be conducted jointly by FWP, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes which co-manage Flathead Lake fisheries, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Forest Service. For more information, please call FWP at 752-5501. 



**A YOUNG BULL TROUT** from a Middle Fork tributary. Young bull trout live one to four years in a tributary before migrating downstream to Flathead Lake.

Bull trout also mature in rivers in the Flathead, Kootenai, and the Clark Fork drainages.

## A Question of Ethics



Montana's Hunter Education Program emphasizes ethics and responsibility.

Conventional wisdom has it that hunters and their conduct will determine the future of

the great tradition of hunting. That's where ethics come in:

**Ethics:** (eth—ics), noun, pl. Defined as: the rightness or wrongness of

human conduct... values of a particular culture or group.

Take a moment to reflect on where you personally stand on the issue, then consider the proverbial 80 percent: the non-hunting, non-committed public, and how they might view the activities of hunters.

For example, what in your mind constitutes ethical and responsible hunting activities?

\*Is shooting captive, pen-reared birds or other animals ethical?

\*Is the use of electronic equipment and gadgetry ethical?

\*Is road hunting ethical?

\*Is "ground sluicing" upland birds ethical?

\*Is shooting nearly tame deer close



to buildings or ski resorts in view of onlookers ethical?

While this list of activities may be legal, they may not represent the best side of the hunting tradition.

As Leopold observed, each person must make judgements on what is right or wrong. Remember that your actions and the example you set for youth will dictate the future of our hunting tradition.

A final note: A tip of the hat goes to Kalispell dentist Chuck Williams for his recent ads advocating taking a child hunting.

Cheers! 

## Junior Instructors Assist in Hunter Ed. Program

Two new junior Hunter Education instructors will be assisting with hunter education classes in Whitefish this year. Samantha Bench, 13, and Vinnie Delgado, 12, both of Whitefish, are looking forward to the challenge and responsibility of teaching youth about hunting safety, ethics, survival, and wildlife conservation.

"Tony Kastella, the lead instructor for the Whitefish area, asked me if I was interested, and I talked it over with my parents," said Bench. "I like helping people, and I thought it would be fun, too."

Bench also looks at it as an opportunity to get more girls involved in hunting. "Many girls think hunting is just for boys; they think that maybe they can't keep up," she said. "Girls don't think they can do it, so they don't get involved."

"Really, many dads want their girls to take the course so they at least know how to handle guns," she added.

Bench also believes that boys need to be more supportive of girls getting into hunting. "Many boys brag about what they get hunting," she said. "But when a girl says she got her deer, some


boys look at her like she's weird."

The experiences Bench relates are mirrored on a national scale. Most hunters are male, and if hunting is to remain a strong tradition in North America, more females must become involved. Girls like Bench can serve as strong role models to open the hunting tradition to more females.

Vinnie Delgado got involved in the program because he loves to hunt. "My dad got me involved in the sport," he said. "My mom likes to hunt, too. I shoot clay pigeons once a week, and my mom shoots a few times a year, but she can still outshoot me."

Delgado noted that the Hunter Education Program is a great learning experience, but it is important for parents to continue to work with their kids.

When asked what he thought of girls getting involved in the hunting tradition, Delgado said, "I've hunted with girls my age. I went with a friend of Dad's who had a daughter. She kept up and did well."

The future of the hunting tradition depends on hunter education. These two junior instructors represent effective role models and will help ensure a bright future for our hunting heritage. 



**EAGER ASSISTANTS.** Vinnie Delgado and Samantha Bench, both of Whitefish, will be new junior Hunter Education instructors this year.

# Bigfork Grizzly Captured and Relocated

Imagine a grizzly lingering a few hundred yards from town, feasting on apples. This could happen only in northwest Montana, and hopefully only in 1992, a year of poor berry crops in the mountains.

After a two week effort, biologists captured a 650-pound male grizzly which had been frequenting the Bigfork area southeast of Kalispell. FWP biologists decided to capture the bear because it ranged very close to town along the base of Swan Hill, posing a potential safety problem for humans and for the bear.

The bear became so trap-wise that biologists had to remove the standard baited culvert trap from its base and place it on the ground before the bear finally entered it.

Biologists Shawn Riley, Rick Mace and Tim Manley transported the bear on November 16 nearly 100 miles but still within its known home range near the Great Bear Wilderness.

"If all goes well the bear should enter a den soon," said Riley. "He was well prepared for the winter with at least six inches of fat. He felt like a huge jellyfish inside a thick fur coat."

Riley rates the chances for success of the relocation as good. He noted that even though the grizzly ranged close to houses over a two month period, he

apparently never became accustomed to garbage. That means that the bear is more likely to remain in its natural home range.

"This bear had ample opportunity to become what many people think of as a marauding grizzly," said Riley. "Fortunately the bear chose not to get into trouble."



**GRIZZLY RELEASE.** Biologists Shawn Riley, Rick Mace and Tim Manley prepared to release a 650-pound grizzly near the Great Bear Wilderness.

The bear had been feasting on apples a few hundred years from the town of Bigfork, and it posed a potential safety problem for humans and the animal.

**INSIDE TRACKS** is published by Region One  
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Dan Vincent, Supervisor  
Jim Cross, Wildlife Manager  
Jim Vashro, Fisheries Manager  
Dave Conklin, Parks Manager  
Ed Kelly, Warden Captain  
John Fraley, Information Officer, Newsletter Editor

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